Social reality stocktaking

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PURPOSE: to present an interim report on “Social Reality Stocktaking”, 2007

CONTENT: in spite of increased affluence across the EU new patterns of inequality are emerging, as are new challenges such as the rise in obesity and a rise in mental health problems. These changes present challenges for the EU. An open Europe based on the free movement of trade and goods has helped to create the jobs and prosperity on which well-being and a better quality of life ultimately depend. However, in recent years it has become clear that many Europeans are beginning to question whether the net effect of globalisation, liberalisation and the drive for greater competitiveness adds to their overall “well-being”. To better understand why this is the case the Commission, in 2006, suggested that a “Social Reality Stocktaking” be done. The purpose of this report, therefore, it to present an interim report on progress to date in the stocktaking exercise.

The aim of the exercise is to explore Europe’s social reality and to build a consensus on common social challenges. The EU has always had a “social” dimension. The Union has played an important role in reinforcing social cohesion, tackling regional inequalities and assisting adjustment to economic change. These elements have been carried through into the Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs. Many social policy initiatives were conceived for an industrial society, where the nature of work was characterised by a mass manufacturing economy, large firms and high levels of union membership and density. Today, however, Europe has an increasingly knowledge based and services oriented society. Whilst the economic dynamic underlying the emergence of the “new” economy in a global work have received attention, the social situation and social challenges are less well understood and analysed. There is no shared diagnosis of these social challenges and how they should be met in the long run. The social reality stocktaking exercise aims to develop that diagnosis and to generate a debate on Europe’s social situating. The results of that debate will feed into the mid-term review of the social policy agenda.

The Commission is, therefore, launching a wide ranging consultation on the social issues and challenges facing Europe. The aim is to reach out to different constituencies to discuss what constitutes Europe’s “social” reality. The Report states that the Commission is in “listening” mode and is not yet testing policy options. Views are being sought on social trends, the main factors driving Europe’s social transformation, “well being” and what contributes to it. This consultation will involve the organisation of different events, a Eurobarometer survey focused on issues of well-being and various types of consultation, including an internet consultation.

Taking on board the results of the consultation exercise the Commission will then issue a report. The report, to be completed buy the end of 2007, will be a snapshot of Europe’s changing social reality, it will examine social trends and their implications and it will map out key issues facing Europe. It will also set out ideas on how best to promote access and opportunity in Europe.